

# The Mind's Eye

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*The Mind's Eye is a journal of review and comment  
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## The Editor's File

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Charlie McIsaac died in 1984. During his time at North Adams State College he contributed to numerous projects while serving as Director of Freel Library. One of his endeavors was the creation of *The Mind's Eye* in 1976. Charlie sold the idea of a publication which could include poetry, short essays, reviews, and commentary to a few colleagues. From a prospectus which was followed by a trial issue or two, he launched the first issue in April 1977. From two to five issues would appear on campus annually during the next half dozen years. Many at the college contributed. So did persons from outside our campus. *The Mind's Eye* served as a forum for many and it is

important, we feel, that it not disappear. So, after a long hiatus, *The Mind's Eye* reappears, and with it an invitation to you to contribute. The editorial board is convinced that we can once again produce a quality "journal of review and comment." We are certain of the importance of maintaining such a publication on a college campus and know the value of providing an additional opportunity for colleagues to share ideas. That, after all, is why Charlie McIsaac created it more than a decade ago. We know, too, that continuing this enterprise would please Charlie.

— The Editorial Board  
The Mind's Eye

## Remembering Charlie

Shortly after his cat Buffy died in 1982, Charlie McIsaac wrote a brief remembrance, published later in *The Mind's Eye*. It's a lovely piece, sentimental but not maudlin, and like all his work beautifully written. Charlie ended it saying,

Knowing he is not here any more comes to us in bits and pieces. We cannot give him up in one leap. Love is not like that. We loved him dearly.

We are grateful that he came into this house, a blue-eyed buff and white kitten who added riches to our lives. He has taken a part of us with him, and we are diminished. We have let him go, but we cannot forget.

Charlie McIsaac died in November 1984. I find that I am one of many who cannot forget him and, like those others, I, too, am diminished by his death. But Charlie would not have cared whether people remembered him as a person. Self-importance, ego, pretension were not what Charlie was about. Words, ideas, and causes were Charlie's life. He genuinely cared how people spoke and wrote, how and what they thought. He worried about whether we would be sensible enough to preserve our planet, our society, our community, and ourselves for a livable future.

It is difficult now for me to think about the arms race, nuclear weapons, environmental degradation, poverty, or any of the survival issues faced by so many without remembering Charlie's wisdom and counsel. It is just as hard to think about any of the foibles which beset us as individuals without remembering Charlie's compassion and forgiveness. And it is impossible for me to take note of the arrogance or hypocrisy of those who would impose on others, without remembering Charlie's integrity and principle.

At this funeral I said that Charlie McIsaac served as an extra measure of conscience for us all. His editorial commentary in *The Mind's Eye* testifies to his passionate concern with the big issues. He knew, as we all know, that they won't take care of themselves, but require our vigilance, critique, and, if necessary, revolt if we are to survive.

I also remember Charlie as tall, slow in movement, either grumbling or chuckling, thoughtful, concerned. And so many of us remember him whenever we think, worry, talk, or write about the problems of the world. As a stimulator of conscience Charlie continues to serve all of us well.

— Stephen A. Green



## A Rose is a Rose

by Erva Zuckerman

**A**s I sit at my kitchen table on a Sunday morning, contemplating a rose, a welter of impressions fermenting within me begins to take shape. The rose is one of forty-four, raised with a lot of care in the unfavorable (for roses) climate of the Berkshires, which were presented as part of an improvised graduation ceremony at the end of the Elderhostel week at North Adams State College. How can such a gift be reciprocated?

The owner of the stained glass studio we visited told us of his reluctance to take apprentices because if they did not use what he had taught them, he felt his time had been wasted. What more could a teacher wish than to know that at least some of the seeds of wisdom have not fallen on stony ground? Doesn't human gratification come from a balance between input and output? That idea was picked up from a class in the sociology of ideas at an Elderhostel on Nantucket. It has been quoted on several occasions since, and it comes back to me now. Yes, feedback is needed, but how can it be given? Would that, like Hawthorne, I could make every word count.

We happened to stay at North Adams State College for two weeks because our names had not come up in the lottery for Williams, Amherst, or Bennington. We were disappointed at first because we had looked forward to the experience of two different colleges on our Elderhostel vacation, but we decided to give North Adams a chance.

Our orientation emphasized Elderhostel as an educational experience. One member of our group protested that we were not expected to attend all three classes. Some found an eight o'clock class a little early, but most were pleased to get in all three classes in the morning so that the afternoons would be free for field trips or other pursuits.

Our classes were held in Mark Hopkins Hall. The name evoked an image of a teacher at one end of a log and a student at the other. This recalled to me an imaginary dialogue, written at age eighteen, in which such a teacher was unable to give a satisfactory answer to a student's question, "What am I here for?" (By implication, what is the purpose of all this learning?)

**W**e approached our first class, in science fiction, with some skepticism. Before long we found

ourselves looking at our world upside down and from new angles. How would we react if beings of higher intelligence treated us as we treat our insect populations? What would it be like to have another concept of time? Could our technology triumph over us? "Science Fiction as Philosophy" we called it, pleased with our discovery that it offered more than mere diversion.

Our next hour brought us back to the present. Some of us had personal reasons for an interest in Africa. To others it may have been a strange and unknown continent, but none of us could escape its effect on our lives. Five days were not enough to come to grips with its complexity, but we had a glimpse of the problems that ensue when differing cultures must live side by side, and when modern technology confronts a traditional way of life.

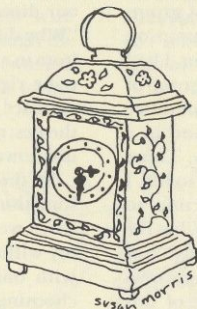
Studying the short novel took us into universal concerns. We tested our own views of life against those of Kafka, Mann, Conrad, and Solzhenitsyn. We complained about the quantity of reading our courses required, but for me the desire to get the most from class discussion overcame the temptation to run off to the summer theater in Williamstown. Some sacrifices must be made for education. How often does one have the opportunity to discuss vital questions with an assortment of peers from varying backgrounds? What made it especially interesting was that we were all elders.

I have met people who do not like to characterize themselves as elders. They prefer to say, "I'm going to a hostel," or suggest that "continuing education" is a better title.

Probably they have never been exposed to a society in which elders were revered or ancestors worshipped.

Some of the excitement came from viewing both new and familiar works from the perspective of a lifetime of experience. Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" was less bewildering and frightening than it had seemed when first encountered in my college days.

The evening programs carried our education a step further. Each was related to one of our classes. Sometimes I hesitated to regard them as entertainment. Nothing would have induced me to sit through *Apocalypse Now* except my curiosity to compare it with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. For me the connection was made when the film's image of a pile of children's severed arms brought to the surface a childhood memory: a man with no hands whom I had known on





the mission station in the Belgian Congo, where I had grown up. I had been told that his hands had been cut off by King Leopold's soldiers when he was a baby because his parents had failed to deliver their quota of copal or rubber. As I shared this observation with the class the next day, the physical tension and sensation of inner upheaval surprised me as it sounded in my voice. The reaction was puzzling until I later realized that in that moment the distance between life and art had been closed.

**W**e were looking forward to the second week by the end of our first. It promised to give us an opportunity to continue to explore some of the questions and issues in which we had been engaged. The weekend was an interlude of relaxation, with time to enjoy a rehearsal at Tanglewood and to finish reading *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. I wanted my own impressions to compare with the class discussion of what makes the survival of humanity possible in a destructive environment.

Familiarity with our surroundings put us at ease as we met the new arrivals. With fewer new impressions to take in, the process of getting acquainted was more relaxed. I could even feel the shell of my insulation beginning to crack a little. It reminded me of group experiences in my college days. I had been a commuting student, but encouraged by a sociology professor, I had spent two summers living and working with a group of my peers in an American Friends' Service Committee work camp in the Pennsylvania coal fields and in a group of settlement houses in New York City. Those two summers brought my studies in sociology to life. I could not expect the same kind of interaction to develop in a week or even two in an Elderhostel, but the comparison made me realize how separated our intellectual lives had become as we pursued our own lifestyles in relative privacy. Perhaps a little of this comfort and privacy had to be given up before we could discover what we had in common. Sharing a college dorm felt a little awkward at first, but sometimes, as we brushed our teeth, our exchanges went beyond the usual pleasantries to touch on the issues we had discussed in class.

The second week began as had the first, with an evening guided tour of the historic Victorian homes that lined Church Street, adjacent to the college. With a companion from the first week, I decided to branch out to see more of the town. Over the weekend a local paper had published "A Walking Tour of North Adams," describing some of the historic buildings. Following it, we found the house described as the "most elegant" and began to look for its

"meticulously preserved" features. The Queen Anne carriage barn, the mansard roof, and the corner tower were easy to spot, but where and what were the "oculus dormers"? We walked around the house as far as we could, examining it from every angle. "What about those little round windows in the tower? Of course, they look like eyes with the upper lid overhanging a little." The pleasure in our discovery lingered on—so long that I began to wonder why. What is this satisfaction in acquiring a bit of information that I will never need to use, even in a TV quiz show? Ah, this is how we educate ourselves. The process is important, not the result. If this feature had been pointed out on the tour, I would have nodded with a passing interest and forgotten it the next day.

We plunged into our classes, eager to learn what Chaucer and Hawthorne had to offer that would help us live our lives today. The prospect of interacting with four different professors in our class of forty-four on the topic of religion and the human spirit was exciting.

Impressions accumulated and connected from class to class . . . Chaucer as a social critic describing the clerics of his day . . . The modern TV evangelists . . . Hawthorne's Puritans taking part in a witches' revel. With the skill of an expert guide, our instructor led us into the heart of Hawthorne's gloomy stories, focusing our discussion with a few questions on the board—"Why did he laugh?"—calling us by name as she drew from us a variety of answers, questioning some, labeling none right, but leaving us to choose those that best matched our experience. We pondered Hawthorne's themes: man's relation to himself, to others, and to the unknown; his aspiration toward immortality.

By the end of the second week I became aware that something had changed for me. During the first week, when we had suffered from the heat, I was surprised at my willingness and ability to sit through three classes with only a short break between each. Usually, in choosing an Elderhostel, I look for classes that will take me out of doors or involve physical activity or field

trips. I become restless if confined too long to a hot room with a talkative crowd. Now I found myself content with the view of mountains from the classroom window. When we moved to a classroom with our backs to the windows, I was so involved in the discussion that I had no regrets. There would be time for an afternoon swim in the lake.

**O**n the last day, as we confronted our four professors who had presented varied aspects of religion and the human spirit with our own views and questions, a common underlying concern emerged from our differing approaches. One member expressed it for us: how can the trend toward





alienation in modern society be overcome?

Sometime in the middle of the last night a rush of impressions woke me and would not let sleep return. Drawing on past experience, I waited quietly for them to settle, perhaps to take a recognizable form. First to appear was a sense of unease, as if something had been left undone. What could it be? Watch a little longer. The forest animal may come out of hiding. There it is. Tomorrow we part. Bonds that have been formed must be broken. Is it possible for our farewells to express what we have experienced here? Sleep returned and with it a dream. We were returning from Elderhostel, encountering some vague obstacles along the way. Suddenly, rounding two large trucks parked by the side of the road, a car appeared, approaching us slowly but head-on. I put out my hand and cried a warning, but it was too late. We passed through the car as if it were a mist. "How Hawthorn-ish," commented someone to whom I told the dream next morning.

Goodbyes were said, as they had to be. Some of those returning by bus entrusted their roses to my care. On impulse I distributed them to members of the staff who had been an important part of the experience, keeping only one. I hesitated over this choice. At the graduation I had watched as the roses were lifted from a large ice bucket and presented alphabetically. The first woman on the list received a particularly unusual one with dark red petals nearly white underneath. Through the whole alphabet, I watched for another like it. It was too much to hope that it would come to me, but to my surprise it did. Such a strange coincidence could hardly have been planned. Why not keep them both? No, a rose is a rose. One is enough. It was given to someone who appreciated it as I had. As we climbed into our car, a tune ran through my head: "Somebody else is taking my place." The task had been completed.

But that was not the end. All the way home, I could feel the yeast rising. What was it that had made the experience so much more than we had expected? Was it the two-week stay, the relation of the courses to each other, the quality of the teachers, the group that had been attracted, the vision and availability of our coordinators? Whenever I pinned it down, like a butterfly in a glass case, something had gone out of it. Yet the impressions continue to be rearranged into new patterns. New creations keep coming into view. I can almost feel the chemical process taking place in my cells.

**T**he rose is fully open now, revealing its heart. From somewhere a question surfaces. If it is true, as our elders have told us, that man is made in the image of God, would not man have to be able to create himself? With the question comes a sense of shock. How could that be? Don't ancient myths warn us of the

dangers of such an undertaking? Or is the danger rather in taking it too literally, or like Dr. Rappacini, for the wrong purpose?

As I go about my household chores, unpacking, cleaning, tending the garden, the feeling of gestation continues. If we must educate ourselves with the help of a teacher, perhaps a paradigm could be found. We have sacred texts, old legends, epics. I settle for something simpler, the fairy tales on which my developing psyche was nourished.

When I was raising my children in the 1950s, fairy tales had gone out of fashion. I remember a mother protesting when a storyteller began "Jack and the Beanstalk." But if fairy stories had been banned I think I would have read them to my children in secret, for they have come to my aid often, as they do now. After the youngest brother had completed his tasks with such help as he could find along the way, he won the hand of the princess who had inspired him to do so, and they lived happily ever after. What other kind of immortality could one wish?

As I round the corner of my house on my way to rake the back yard, my eye is caught by a battered piece of paper, a sheet of music. Hamburger wrappers and soda cans I find quite often, but whence cometh this music? There are words, one phrase repeated over and over—"The best that you can do—The best thing you can do." It sounds like a message. Sure enough, there it is at the bottom of the page, "—is fall in love."



**H**ow simple that makes everything. I put it aside until I have finished my chores. An image forms as I work, of throngs of young people—our children's children—passing through college doors, wishing and waiting to fall in love, to find out what life is all about.

The raking is finished. I examine the paper to see whether I have missed anything. On the other side I find the full message.

When caught between the moon  
and New York City,  
The best that you can do,  
The best thing you can do  
is fall in love.

Where will they find their help, the young people who ask these questions and face these challenges? From you and from us. For better or for worse, we are their model.

The rose has faded now. Its petals have wrinkled and dried. But I do not feel sad. It has fulfilled its purpose on this earth. The rose has become a rose.

*Erva Zuckerman writes from her perspective as a social worker and as the author of Child Welfare (Free Press, 1983). The inscription in her gift of this book to the college is reprinted on the cover of this Mind's Eye.*



## Melville and the Berkshires

by Arnold Bartini

The genius of Herman Melville came to full flowering in the Berkshire Hills. We indelibly associate New England with Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Dickinson, Frost, and with Melville's good friend Hawthorne. New England conditioned the outlook and the techniques many of these writers employed. But we think of Melville as somehow wedded to the South Sea Islands and to the ocean expanses which nourished the *White Whale*. It is conceivable that he might have come to port in New Bedford or Nantucket, but that he would have been profoundly inspired by the placidity of some verdant hills seems, at first, unlikely.

If we search the Berkshire writings of Melville, we find no startling revelations of the Berkshire spirit. He was not, in the true sense of the word, a regionalist. We find his language affected only slightly by local dialect and colloquialism; he did not, like Frost, build a style according to a characteristic New England formula, nor did he seek reclusion as Emily Dickinson and Nathaniel Hawthorne had. His style varies from work to work, to such a striking extent as to discourage categorization of a typically Melvillian technique. A paradox he was in these hills, but never a misfit; in subtle ways he was indeed conditioned by the Berkshire landscape and populace.

By temperament and by cultural heritage Melville was in fact always tied to his New York State origin. Usually when embarking upon an excursion to Greylock, to Monument Mountain, or to some other Berkshire landmark, he would be in the company of a circle of New York friends, including the congenial Evert A. Duyckinck. But Melville the extrovert, excursionist among champagne bottles and new-mown hay, found a most solid friendship in the introverted Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was as solidly New England as its granite hills. This former resident of Albany, wounded in his gropings for literary recognition and religious belief, and this New Englander, much saddened and burdened by his Puritan heritage, came together in the closest intellectual and spiritual bond. That the many conversations between the two men darkened the shadows along Melville's mental way, and increased the depth of his musings, is

legendary and need not be elaborated here. Suffice it to say that Hawthorne's removal from Lenox in 1851 launched Melville's spiritual and intellectual decline. His powers were revitalized only spasmodically until the final year of his life, when he would create *Billy Budd*. More than forty years would elapse between the eruption that was *Moby-Dick* (1851), and the resigned meditation that was *Billy Budd*.

There is a considerable amount of New England in *Moby-Dick*, but little of Berkshire. Berkshire County did not even care to acknowledge the book when it was published. *The Greylock Sentinel* of North Adams printed a few superficial statements about the book's depiction of the whaling industry, but its editors, along with the literary world, did not seem aware of the book's significance.

The view from Arrowhead, the breeze from Greylock, the picnics at Lake Pontreosuc had provided a fresh and tranquil atmosphere for Melville to dwell upon his earlier sea recollections and impressions, and upon the agonizing ambiguities of the universe.

Physically and emotionally wearied by the titanic effort of this exhausting masterpiece, Melville wrote his next work in a morbid state of mind. *Pierre* (1852) emerges a curious conglomeration of Elizabethan poetry, romanticism, Gothic elements, sentimentality, and even absurdity. That novel is of interest primarily because of the striking parallels between *Pierre* and Melville himself. Like *Pierre*, Melville could trace his happiest boyhood memories back to the country—to the days he spent upon his uncle's Pittsfield farm. Also like Melville, *Pierre* had experienced unhappy family ties, labored as an author, been concerned with philosophical speculations, suffered spiritual unrest, approached insanity, and would finally deteriorate in the city. Many of the characters in the book have Berkshire people as prototypes. Portions of the book are even located in a Berkshire-like setting. The elm-lined streets of Pittsfield, Broadhall, the Hoosic and Taconic mountain ranges are all there if we look for them. And certainly we cannot miss the tinge of bitterness in the dedication of the book to the inanimate Mt. Greylock. Melville could deem no human worthy of *Pierre*.

In 1855 Melville produced *Israel Potter*, a story with a





Berkshire locale. Israel is a typical patriot, exiled from his native New England. The descriptions in the beginning of the book were likely inspired by the scenery around Arrowhead. But we cannot attribute the name Israel Potter to Pittsfield's Potter Mountain, because Melville had borrowed the name from a work published in Providence in 1824.

His next Berkshire product, "I and My Chimney" (1856), was a short story that has stimulated all kinds of Freudian speculations about the nature of Melville's relations with his wife and his mother. It is in reality perhaps only a good-natured *tour-de-force*, with enough charm to move Melville to inscribe some of its lines as poetry on the fireplace at Arrowhead.

The whole series of *Piazza Tales* (1856) originated from Arrowhead. From this collection, scholars are currently much impressed by "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno." Less popular is another story written during this period, "Cock-a-Doodle-Do!" (1853), in which Melville aimed a devastating blow at the transcendentalism of some of his New England colleagues. With a striking satirical touch, Melville attacked the kind of materialism that raises man to such an Olympus that he is not even aware of his physical needs. The peak of absurdity in the story is represented by Merrymusk, proud owner of the cock. Merrymusk watches his impoverished family die off, one by one, firm in his conviction that all is well with the world. Merrymusk, a type of Yankee farmer, perhaps symbolizes a deceptively optimistic New England, at the peak of its prosperity, unable to perceive the signs of its approaching decline.

Of similar tone is "The Tartarus of Maids" (1855), which belittles the Victorian optimism over the Industrial Revolution. Melville apparently saw not progress in paper mills in Dalton, but a kind of retrogressive sterility. It is interesting to note in this respect that as recently as 1952 the paper industry retaliated in an article (Harrison Elliott, "A Century Ago an Eminent Author Looked upon Paper and Papermaking," *Papermaking* 21:55-58). This retort would

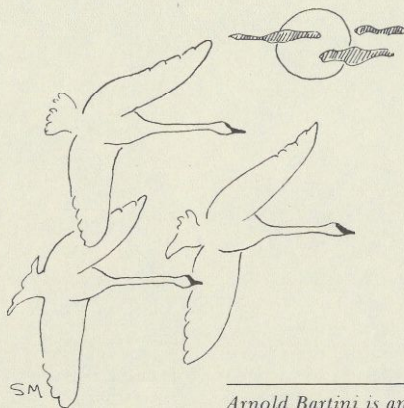
doubtlessly have amused Melville.

Melville could turn his satire upon particular individuals as well. Fanny Kemble, of Lenox fame, becomes a tomboy character in *The Confidence-Man* (1857). Fanny had been a renowned Shakespearian actress and a bulwark of Lenox society. She had even donated the clock for the Church-on-the-Hill. But Melville belittles her for her boy-like nature and her lack of warmth. To climax his attack on her personality, he gives her in the novel the name of Goneril.

His works just cited are those to which we can trace some direct Berkshire influence. Personally, the Berkshire years were a stimulant (through the friendship with Hawthorne) and a depressant (through the mental anguish which illness and overwork enacted from him). Socially, Melville proved the curious extrovert, probing the Berkshire landscape and incorporating what he observed into his writing. Philosophically, Melville proved a conservative who had little patience with the materialistic and technological ideas which were beginning to shape the world's thinking. The hills of Berkshire might have reminded him of "the purple of the billows," but never of the deification of nature fostered by the transcendentalists.

Spiritually, there was a similar note of sadness in his nature. Frantically, he investigated sects, like the Shakers, hoping to find a tangible belief for his life. His friend Hawthorne had noted that Melville was "better

worth immortality than most of us." This instability of Melville's spirit probably constituted the greatest unhappiness of his Berkshire years. In 1863 he abandoned Berkshire forever, but the color of New England had indeed tinted his philosophy, not in the raving red of the glorious sunrise behind a white church spire, but in the pale blue cast of the misty mountain horizon.



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The drawings in this issue are by Susan Morris of East Dover, Vermont, and Leon Peters of North Adams State College.

